

## **Homestay Tourism: A Community-based Approach for Empowering Local Communities**

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The rapid expansion of the tourism sector in Sri Lanka in recent decades has given rise to the concept of sustainable tourism. Sustainable homestay tourism development is strongly intertwined with environmentally conscious travel. In this context, one of the most effective ways to encourage community development in tourist destinations where locals play an important role is to stabilize tourism sustainability. Unawatuna, which is located in southern Sri Lanka, is a popular tourist destination and tourism is the primary economic activity in that area. Hence, the aim of the study was to examine the potential of homestay tourism in enhancing the local economy. A questionnaire survey was conducted to collect data from 100 respondents (age 16+) using a purposive sampling method. Relative importance analysis and PESTEL analysis were used to analyse the data. According to the findings, 3% of the respondents are unemployed. Fifty- eight percent of the workforce is engaged in tourism-related activities. Among them, males (80%) dominate the tourism sector in the study area. The study identified three main locations for promoting homestay tourism in this area which are Unawatuna beach area, Jungle beach, and Rumassala Sanctuary. Furthermore, 78% of respondents said that they were eager to begin homestay tourism. The respondents said it would increase job opportunities for locals (63%) and balance gender equity in the tourism industry (74%). Most of the respondents (79%) prefer to combine homestay with environmental and cultural factors such as village life, traditional foods and rituals, nature or workplace tours, religious studies, and visits to religious sites. The study revealed that homestay tourism will enable interaction between tourists and locals for a more flourishing experience in tourism. The research proposes homestay tourism as a viable option for reducing unemployment and household poverty. It has the potential to empower females and aging groups, particularly in tourist destinations.

**Keywords:** homestay tourism, Rumassala, sustainable, Unawatuna